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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a mentor teacher program for beginning instructors established at The Language Center of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). The paper begins by noting several challenges experienced by beginning teachers that need to be recognized by mentors, after which the objectives, procedures, and guidelines of the project are identified. Although the mentoring project involved teachers of adult learners, many principles and guidelines may apply to the mentoring process of teachers at various grade levels and in different subject areas. The project progressed through three adaptations based on experiences gained during previous approaches. The feeling of participants in the project was positive; the project was viewed as not merely a duplicate teacher training program, but rather as an in-service teacher development process; beginning teachers assessed coaching as an instructive experience; experienced teachers were reassured because their experiences and competence were valued; beginning teacher assessment was based on detailed data and balance; and, students were involved in the program. Mentoring projects such as this can be considered a kind of "action research"; trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching, and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the quality of educational practices. (LL)

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ABSTRACT

A Mentor teacher program for beginning instructors at the Language Center in Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium is described. After noting several challenges experienced by beginning teachers that mentoring teachers need to recognize, the objectives, procedure, and guidelines in the project are identified. Although the mentoring project involved teachers of adult learners, many principles and guidelines in this program may apply to the mentoring process of teachers at various grade levels and in different subject areas. The action research project progressed through three adaptations based on experiences during previous approaches. Reasons for the positive feedback from both the beginning teachers and their mentors are outlined in the latter part of the monograph.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

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TUTORING BEGINNING TEACHERS THROUGH A MENTOR TEACHER PROGRAM

B. Van Thielen

I. INTRODUCTION

Quality control in education requires constant attention. Good education is dependent on the competence and efforts of individual teachers as well as that of the entire staff and school administration. However, it is not always evident that beginning teachers automatically possess all the necessary professional abilities to effectively meet the challenge. The task that awaits beginning teachers with little practical experience is a demanding one.

Beginning teachers often feel the youngest, know their colleagues insufficiently, and often find it difficult to articulate their specific problems or negative experiences. On the other hand, experienced colleagues often do not immediately perceive problems newcomers face because it has been a long time since they started out and because they consider their capacity as an a priori fact. A teacher's workload is heavy and he/she cannot always spare the necessary time for a beginning colleague.

In order to facilitate initiation into a new career, CLT, The Language Centre of the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, set up a coaching scheme under which experienced colleagues coached first and second year teachers, thus helping them cross the threshold of their first job. This program which involves adult language students has been in existence from 1986-1992.

A coaching scheme paired each beginning teacher with a mentor teacher who actively assisted them and provided a support for help at all times. Teaching problems

were extensively discussed, and experiences, teaching materials and aids were interchanged. Close collaboration between colleagues was strongly encouraged from the very outset, and an open team spirit quickly developed.

II. CHALLENGES FOR THE BEGINNING TEACHER

Awareness of the struggles of a beginning teacher is essential before meaningful guidance can be offered. Mentoring teachers need to recognize the struggles with initial planning, designing basic classroom procedures, utilizing effective language during instruction, balancing the whole instructional program, evaluating students, and attempting to integrate in with the rest of the staff. Recognition of these challenges is the initial step for mentor teachers to help beginning teachers experience a successful initiation to their careers.

Initial planning

Mentoring teachers must recognize the importance of planning for beginning teachers. At a first stage, a number of questions need to be answered. What am I going to teach? Why? To whom? How? What tools am I going to use?

The content of the course is largely determined by a syllabus, based on long and short term goals. The occurrence of a particular aspect of the course at a particular moment is not accidental. Therefore, it is of vital importance to formulate accurately and concretely the goals to be attained during a given lesson. In order to be able to achieve these goals it is essential for the beginning teacher to know the target audience in terms of its (a) already acquired knowledge, (b) its patterns of thought, and (c) its learning

strategies. An adequate knowledge of the target group is of utmost importance to select the proper teaching method and tools.

It is important to recognize that beginning teachers tend to emphasize the content of the course : schemes and diagrams, word explanation, solutions to exercises (they focus on " what shall I teach?"). Aspects such as goals, target group, method and evaluation (questions why? to whom? how? with which tools?) receive less attention. Though quite understandable considering the lack of experience and insight, this misconception can entail far-reaching consequences for actual classroom procedures.

Classroom procedure

Class procedure is strongly dominated by the beginning teacher's need for reassurance: he prefers to stick as closely as possible to the class preparation (lesson plan) and tries to avoid venturing into dangerous territory. If the latter does happen, he risks wandering off the subject. Beginning teachers may lack experience to sense the usefulness and expediency of the digression. The beginning teacher tries to avoid tricky questions by preparing the class meticulously. If these difficult questions do crop up, a beginning teacher may try to hide behind feigned self-assurance in order not to lose face.

Language interaction

Language is communication. The interaction between student and teacher is of crucial importance. The teacher needs to command an effective questioning technique. In the beginning, this technique often only aims at eliciting the expected answer. Consequently, the beginning teacher only listens for the desired answer, whereas every

answer can enable the teacher to learn something about the student -- about his comprehensive faculty, his patterns of thought, his perception of the problem, or the understandability of the question.

Furthermore, beginning teachers frequently fear moments of silence. If the answer does not follow the question promptly, a new question is added, possibly directed at another student. Therefore, it is essential that beginning teachers are encouraged to learn to listen and to reflect on the answers and attitude of the students.

Finally it is essential to encourage beginning teachers to allow students to talk as often as possible. Students require this practice, not the teacher. Yet, the "teacher talking time" with beginning teachers is found to be very high. They talk during grammar and vocabulary sessions, comment on reading texts, explain more than really is necessary, and are easily tempted to actively participate in the discussion instead of acting as listener or chairman.

Program balance

Beginning teachers need help in learning to balance the total class programme. The subject matter has to be clearly defined and well-timed. Offering learning strategies, selecting interesting material geared to attainable goals, limiting the volume of information offered during one lesson, and distinguishing essentials from secondary considerations are important milestones in the skill development of a beginning teacher.

Obviously, these aspects relate to experience. The fact that a good lesson consists of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion is often only theoretically obvious!

The selection of a proper method and adequate use of teaching tools contribute largely

to the success of a lesson. "Classroom management" is not a simple business; yet a variety of rules of thumb can offer some solutions. Mentor teachers can help beginners avoid pitfalls such as paying scant attention to seemingly trivial details, attempting to use untested materials, or working with devices without necessary technical knowledge. However, potentially negative experiences can be turned into positive ones provided the necessary help from a mentor teacher is offered.

Evaluation

"Is this clear?" A familiar question. And so is the affirmative student answer which can mislead the beginning teacher. After each part of the lesson and at the conclusion of each session it is essential to check whether the desired goals have been achieved. If this evaluation is neglected a teacher is bound to start lecturing over the students' heads. This also holds true for assignments. They must be simple and crystal clear if results are to be achieved. Beginning teachers also need help to learn to evaluate on a long-term basis. The assessment of the skills acquired by the student in the course of a term or an entire school year is not isolated from short-term or individualized lesson objectives. Drawing this link can occur quicker and smoother if the insight of a mentoring teacher is available.

Integration in with the teaching staff

A beginning teacher should integrate with colleagues as soon as possible. At CLT teamwork is a must: close collaboration marks each language team and the entire

teaching staff at all levels. Course books are designed based on officially recognized curricula. A similar cooperation prevails when it comes to the organisation of written examinations. This requires substantial consultation and hence, language teams meet regularly, sometimes even weekly, on their own initiative. New colleagues find themselves involved from the very beginning! They receive existing course books and during the first year their main task is to prepare their classes thoroughly.

Although the beginning teachers have passed a period of practical training and have taught a set of trial lessons, for the first time they find themselves faced with the sole responsibility for an entire course. They find themselves powerless when confronted with numerous unfamiliar problems. They find it difficult to identify them partly because they fail to recognize certain signals emitted by the student audience.

This is where the experience of a mentor is extremely beneficial for critical self-assessment. Experienced teachers are able to anticipate numerous stumbling blocks in the preparatory stages, and their guidance can avoid many unnecessary frustrations for a beginning colleague which can be most unpleasant and detrimental to self-assurance and job satisfaction.

III. THE CLT COACHING SCHEME

Although the CLT program involved beginning and mentor teachers of adult learners in language instruction, many principles in this program may apply to the mentoring process of teachers at various levels and in different subject areas. At CLT, since all students are adults, their commitment to attend classes has been made. Their motivation is very high. Their perceptions of teaching behaviours is based on high

demands and expectations. These adult students want to perform optimally in the chosen language and expect their instructor to stimulate their interest and effort.

For this reason, they demand insight into both the target objectives and final expectations. They require a soundly structured organisation of course content and organized classes. They expect the necessary support and encouragement for their personal integration of the learning process. Also, they demand an active and personal involvement in classroom procedure. These are high demands, especially when one takes into consideration that 70% of the students are older than the beginning teacher and that they often have a higher professional or academic background than that of their teacher.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM

1.1. To surround the beginning teachers with special attention and the support of an experienced mentor teacher.

1.2. To apply the experience of senior colleagues to the benefit of inexperienced teachers.

1.3. To encourage and reassure beginning teachers and offer them the opportunity to remedy possible problems efficiently.

1.4. To encourage junior and senior colleagues to reflect critically on teaching in all aspects.

1.5. To teach beginning colleagues to work toward attainable objectives.

1.6. To further the integration of beginning teachers within the teaching staff.

1.7. To instill a sense of responsibility in senior teachers towards their junior colleagues.

1.8. To encourage the whole staff to venture beyond their own language (subject) field and to promote an open team spirit among all colleagues and language teams.

2. PROCEDURE TO RECRUIT MENTOR TEACHERS

At the beginning of the school year the new teacher is allocated a mentor. The mentor teacher's recruitment is based on three criteria:

a) the mentor possesses sufficient teaching experience;

b) the teaching timetable of the mentor and beginning teacher allows them to attend each other's classes in their spare hours;

c) the mentor teaches a language different from that of the beginning teacher.

This latter option rests on two considerations: first, the newly recruited teacher is assumed to be sufficiently expert in the target language, and second, the counselling and coaching must focus on the didactic approach rather than on specific, language-related subjects. Moreover, for a mentor to belong to the same language team is virtually impossible because of the constraints of school timetables.

3. THE INITIAL PROGRAM

The coaching scheme consisted of an observation and teaching part, and generally covered a period of two years until the beginning teacher received (promise of) tenure. If tenure was deferred for one year, the coaching was extended for that period.

The first coaching scheme consisted of a total of four lessons, two taught by the mentor teacher and subsequently, two taught by the beginning teacher. Each teacher taught his/her own class. This set of lessons had to be completed by December.

A class at CLT comprised two or three sessions of 60 minutes twice a week. The mentor observed for a selected part of each class; the beginning teacher stayed for the whole duration of the lesson. The written lesson plan covered the whole lesson and both parties received a copy in advance.

An observation checklist was filled out for each lesson observed by the mentor teacher.

The following schedule was followed:

Class I (taught by the mentor):

1. Extensive discussion of class preparation. Agreement on special topics to focus on during class observation.
2. The actual lesson observed by the beginning teacher.
3. Short debriefing.

Class II (taught by the mentor):

1. Lesson observed by the beginning teacher.
2. Extensive follow-up discussion.

Class III (taught by the beginning teacher):

1. Extensive discussion of class preparation : the beginning teacher was given ample opportunity to make modifications advised by the mentor.
2. The actual lesson observed by the mentor teacher.
3. Short follow-up with an outline of areas to focus on and concrete tips for the beginning teacher.

Class IV (taught by the beginning teacher) :

1. Class attended by the mentor and the director.

2. Discussion of class by mentor and director.

The director now entered the situation and received feedback on the evolution of the counselling/ guidance/coaching process. The beginning teachers did not find themselves confronted with contrasting views during the ensuing deliberation and hence, confusion often was avoided.

3. Extensive deliberation with the mentor, director and beginning teacher.

During the second term/ semester all mentor teachers met twice to assess the scheme. In general all participants felt that the experiment was positive. However, some problems were identified.

First, two beginning teachers were unable to cope with their teaching assignment. Consequently, the mentor teachers felt frustrated. In spite of their efforts and positive attitude they were left powerless and insufficiently prepared to entirely accept the situation. A second problem ensued from the former. Although mentor teachers wished to reassure their junior colleagues and to help them remedy their problems, they experienced their own role as a repressive and judgmental one! They had the impression that their junior colleagues-with-problems did not view them as experienced helpers but as executioners.

4. THE SECOND VERSION

Based on the assessment of the initial program, a second variation was developed. In this version the beginning teacher was allocated a different mentor during the second year of teaching. The aim was to allow the junior teacher to share in the experience of several colleagues.

The junior teacher observed a minimum of three lessons taught by the mentor. A checklist was used to focus the observations. For each session a different kind of lesson was selected (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, conversation, language lab etc.). The observation checklist helped the junior teacher focus the observation on selected aspects of instruction and to recognize the underlying objectives.

It was felt to be useful for the junior and senior teacher to discuss the lesson preparation prior to each lesson. The mentor pre-conferenced and observed two classes taught by the junior colleague. The post-conference included the director. Both the mentor teacher and the director received a copy of the initial lesson plan. Dates for these lessons were fixed at least a week in advance.

Before the Easter holidays another class was observed by the mentor teacher and the director. The junior teacher submitted all class preparations (lesson plans) of the second term to the director. These preparations were to comprise concrete objectives, teaching aids/tools, structure of the lesson with detailed procedures, exercises, and guide questions.

After completion of the entire observation-teaching programme, the mentor teacher compiled a final report on the program. This report was discussed with both the junior teacher and the director of studies.

Two meetings were held, one for mentor teachers, the second one for beginning teachers. The mentor teachers stated that in a number of cases it was hard to pinpoint or precisely define some of the problems. One reason for this difficulty was caused by the fact that they had little experience in counselling and coaching beginning teachers. A second reason was related to a language problem. Since the mentor teachers were coaching a colleague teaching another language, they found that their insights into the learning process and their observations of the student-teacher interaction were hindered. They felt that certain problems were rooted in the very individualistic approach characteristic of each course which was based on the unique nature of a particular language.

The junior teachers seemed very satisfied with the existing format. They felt that their mentors gave them a comforting feeling and provided a rich source of inspiration. Feedback indicated that it would be advantageous for them to attend a lesson taught by a colleague belonging to the same language team and grade. They preferred the change of mentor for the second year and opted for a mentor belonging to a different language team but one teaching students at the same grade level. They outlined the task of the mentor teacher as not merely a didactic one , but also a practical one, of offering assistance when administrative, technical or other problems arose.

A two-day seminar on the class observation was organised for the entire teaching staff and mentor teachers were given guidelines upon which to guide discussions about lessons which were observed.

5. THE THIRD VERSION

The observation of lessons by junior teachers was thoroughly altered in the third version of the project. The number of classes observed was reduced from three to two. The mentor and junior teacher attended two more classes taught by colleagues teaching the same language at the same level. The mentor project was evaluated annually by all participants -mentors, junior teachers, and the directors. Since 1991, the junior teachers have met without the principal chairing the meeting. It is significant that junior teachers have suggested that their observations as well as their teaching should be extended, and that the visitations by the director should be increased. This level of confidence in one's colleagues is a strong indicator that a mentoring teacher program can have very beneficial results.

CONCLUSIONS

After some years several conclusions may be drawn from this on-going mentorship project.

1. The over-all feeling of participants in the project has been very positive.
2. This mentoring program is not merely a duplicate teacher training program. In contrast, it is an in-service teacher development process focusing on the specific organisation and uniqueness of each school. An elaborate didactic infrastructure has been integrated within a clearly communicated set of expectations and procedures. It is based on the rationale that it would not be justified to set high demands on inexperienced teachers without offering them the indispensable and

support to materialize these expectations.

3. Beginning teachers assessed the coaching positively. It was an instructive experience for them and facilitated their initiation in teaching. The support of a mentor teacher offered them a comfortable feeling and reduced stress. The acquired insights in the learning process allow them to participate more actively during meetings of their language teams. They felt reassured and became inquisitive. This was exemplified in their demand for more class visits by colleagues, which verified that the presence of observers was not perceived as an inspection or repression, but as an opportunity to be valued.

4. Experienced teachers were reassured because their experience and competence was needed. They felt jointly responsible for their junior colleague as well as for the quality of classroom instruction. They evaluated their role in this learning process as constructive. Class visits and discussions with junior and other colleagues was an enrichment for them. They were stimulated to think beyond their own subject.

5. The director's assessment of beginning teachers was no longer based on a random indication but fitted within a larger context. The evaluation of teachers was based more on detailed data and balance. In this way a more dynamic picture was obtained about the development of a beginning teacher. A less proficient or non-typical performance was placed in perspective. Such teaching performances became viewed as part of a growth process to be explored, and meaningful learning occurred as a result of both positive and negative teaching experiences.

6. Students were involved in the program. The reaction of these adult students was positive and the presence of "inspection"/"control" seldom affected their attitude adversely. Many viewed this constant quality concern displayed by the school as mirroring their own demands for quality. They valued the opportunities to express their views on the CLT courses in a detailed evaluation questionnaire.

CONCLUSION

The CLT mentoring program will continue to grow and change. It is based on fieldwork and practical experience contributes to it daily. New findings become premises for further practical research. In this way such a mentoring project can be considered a kind of 'action research': trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the quality of educational practices. The CLT mentoring project is action research which provides a way of working that links theory and practice into one whole.

The mentor teacher needs to recognize that attention must be continually paid to the area of tension between creativity and flexibility on the one hand, and the restrictive character of timing and planning on the other, while keeping in mind the maxim that "learning is more important than teaching".